



KRISTEN GREEN

HOLDING TRUE TO YOUR 'SELF' AND SPEAKING UP

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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EPISODE 21



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MURRAY: ... experiment for you. Try writing down three things you're grateful for each day for a week and see what happens. And while you're at it, is there anyone you need to let know how much you appreciate them?

Welcome to my podcast. I'm Murray Wright and this is Leadership Moments, real people stories about the people and the moments that have influenced and shaped their leadership.

Today we're entering into the world of the fitness industry. I'm talking with Kristen Green, executive manager of the multi award winning Aquafit Fitness and Leisure Centre located in South West Sydney.

Kristen, welcome and great to have you with us.

KRISTEN: Thank you, Murray. I appreciate the opportunity.

MURRAY: Well, today as always we're asking the three Leadership Moments questions and these are all about really getting you to share your personal stories of leadership and the insights they give us. But before we get into the questions, fitness, great industry, has really grown over the years. What actually brought you to fitness? What was your journey to what you're doing now?

KRISTEN: Yeah. It was probably an accidental journey, to be honest. When I left school, I had and no real idea of what I actually wanted to do career wise so I chose to go into the workforce rather than undertake further study at that stage and when I met my now husband we started to do a little bit of weight training and then joined a local gym. I started to get sort of passionate and found out that I really enjoyed that. So we got to the stage where we're actually out from one of the local gyms and joined another and lo and behold, the typical question... My husband came home, my fiancé at that stage, and said to me, "How would you like to buy a gym?" That was way back in 1989 and I was sort of, "My Christmases are coming once." The next stage for me then was basically to undergo my fitness training which I did in 1989 to become an aerobics instructor back then in the flurry days of the big hair in the '80s. We ended up buying the local gym. We had the gym from '89 through to about 1992. That was a great experience and a great foray into the industry. So that was really my crucial starting point. So being in that bowl I'm still working part time. My husband was working full time in the mining industry, so I would teach nine to ten classes a week, do a bit of personal training, work on reception, do the marketing, clean the showers, jack of all trades really. So it gave me a really broad understanding of business, although we ended up selling the business some three years later. It was a wonderful



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sort of place to cut my teeth and the only reason that we sold it is that I then went on to university because I thought at that stage I really wanted to learn more about the industry and the human body and exercise science.

MURRAY: So a good moment I think to ask you that first question. Who has influenced you the most in your career?

KRISTEN: Yeah. I know and I just have to repeat the question. When I look back now I don't know that there was any one particular person and probably a lot of people say the same. I think if I'm honest there are different influences for different stages of my career in my life. Like I said, I started off with no real role model or no experience. For me, it was a case of sort of learning as I went. I didn't really have anyone that I could turn to in terms of kind, you know, mentoring or helping me through that process. What I do have though is a thirst for knowledge and I am a knowledge seeker and I'm passionate about trying to seek out information and to self teach myself. So in those very early days I wanted to kind of learn about intuitively about leadership, so I did a lot of reading. One of the persons that I turned to was John Maxwell. I read a lot of his books, "Developing the Leader Within" and trying to sort of read that and what I found that there's a lot of congruence with what he was saying and the way that I was. It was kind of like, "Oh yeah. I do that," or "Yeah, that makes sense." It was just intuitively that it made a lot of sense for me. I think those principles still stay with me now. They're always there. As I've matured into different roles, I think there are always great people to learn from and again through reading. I was very lucky to be in the audience when Jim Collins spoke many years ago at an [Inaudible 04:13] function and his book "Good to Great" was a great influence on me and helped me kind of deal with some problems that I was experiencing with some of my team in terms of leadership at work. Things around me sort of making sure that you've got the right people on the bus, making sure they're in the right seats and if they're not the right people, to get them off the bus pretty quickly. So even if you just kind of applied those three principles, they're kind of guiding posts, I suppose, for my whole philosophy around sort of leading people and that approach to leadership. As I'm sort of still growing now in my journey I'm finding that I'm reaching out more to people as mentors informally through different networks that I've got. I was lucky with my role on the board of Fitness Australia. My current role is that I was able to reach out and have a great relationship with the then CEO, Lauretta Stace, and another wonderful woman, Susan Kingsmill, who is on the board at the moment and they actually supported my nomination and it's great to kind of look to people like that, to learn from their experience and to sort of be inspired by their journey in their accomplishments along the way as well. So it's ever changing. It's very dynamic and I think there will always be people along the way that will influence me at different levels and I think it just kind of depends on where you are. But a lot of it I think is around my leadership philosophy



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in how I approach that. I really believe that entrenched in all that is my overarching philosophy is to treat people the way that you want to be treated and to really... I think it's Maya Angelou that sort of said that people will forget what you say and they'll forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.

MURRAY: Yes.

KRISTEN: So I guess that's the crux of my leadership. So I will seek out people that have that same philosophy and align myself with them to make sure that there is a congruence around that.

MURRAY: A lot of people there and I love the way you've talked about books and we forget, don't we.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: We read and they influence and we've all got those people. So that's a great call out. Some of those books you mentioned, we'll find them and put them into the resources on the website.

KRISTEN: Absolutely. Yeah.

MURRAY: So you talk about your leadership philosophy and I really want to come back to your work at Aquafit. So you opened in 2004 and you really talk about making this a valuable community asset. What's behind that? What's your thinking there?

KRISTEN: Yeah. I mean the opportunity to open the Aquafit business as a new business was the best thing that could have happened to me, I mean really, the alignment with the Campbelltown Catholic Club. When they were seeking someone to come on board to basically build a new business, I was thrilled to have that opportunity. In doing so what I found was an alignment of my personal values with the club's values. So the essence around quality customer service, providing the service for members, being deeply entrenched in the community and providing a great asset for the members with something that really sort of resonated with me. The opportunity to I guess start at the ground level without any preconceived ideas to build a team, to bring on a team of people and create a vision for what we could be was at the time the most exciting thing. It's just a once in a lifetime opportunity.

MURRAY: I would imagine you had a bit more budget when you [Inaudible 07:33]. You've earned that little place.



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KRISTEN: Just a little bit. Yes. And it was just a willingness and a can do attitude because the club had a very clear vision in terms of establishing a community asset and a recreation facility for its members, but also part of the board, a diversification strategy. So they had a lot riding on this business to be able to see... Test the waters. Is this going to work? But what I found... The first thing was having just a quality facility in terms of the best fit out and a timeless kind of appeal with the building and the facility, which I think is something which still stands now. And when I talk about the building, what is important about that is that it has a timeless appeal and I think in that it attracts the right kind of people. What we mean by that is I think the members that are part of Aquafit come to us because we generally care and concern about them. So we want to see us entrenched in the community, so we're involved in a lot of different community events. We do a lot of fund raising to support local initiatives, but we do build a great community of people both inside Aquafit and outside and we take our community outside as well for different events. And like I said, we have fund raised over the years. We've raised something like probably well over \$150,000 towards things like the 24 Hour Fight Against Cancer Macarthur. So our members come together in that sense. But we provide a place where people feel comfortable. They're not intimidated. They don't feel out of place.

MURRAY: Where does culture fit into this for you? Because I know you believe in that really strongly. How does that permeate the business and spread into the whole community piece?

KRISTEN: Yeah. I mean to me culture is the overarching strategy that we have because everything comes back to culture and it starts with people that you recruit. When you go through that recruitment process and look at people to join the business what we're looking for is people that share our values, that have alignment with what we do that show our vision. Although we don't always get it right, but if we can put in at the best point the systems and processes to look for people that have the right attitude, then we can train them skills and abilities. So we really want that culture alignment there. The culture is something which drives everything that we do and I think the big piece around the community is definitely something which comes true. But I just think it's the whole way that we present ourselves. It's our branding. It's our positioning. The fortunate thing for me is having been there since 2004, being able to really establish that culture and it's something that has to be managed a lot of times. So it's not something which you can just say, "Okay, this is our culture," and off you go. It's got to be something which has got to be tweaked and re-tweaked and aligned and changed over the years as the business grows and develops.



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MURRAY: Yeah. So here it's really about deciding what you want, that whole piece. What does that look like for us? But then it's in the hiring.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: Getting the people with the attitude.

KRISTEN: Yes.

MURRAY: In the first place.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: Skillset can... But I love that piece about it's an organic living thing that's got to be evolved. Quite often we forget that and we have problems after.

KRISTEN: Yeah.

MURRAY: Second question. What was your 'aha' moment? That moment when you suddenly understood what this thing leadership was all about.

KRISTEN: Again with that, I don't think I've ever had kind of like a lightning bolt moment. I think when I look back now through the eyes of experience, you look back and you might go, "Aha. Makes sense now." But when you're growing up... Leadership starts at a young age. Leadership starts in primary school, in high school and when I look back now it's like some of the roles that I saw myself in, in high school also, class captain or sports captain and things like that. So you're organically finding yourself in positions of leadership without you probably even really being cognizant that that's a leadership role as such. I certainly didn't know that. So I always kind of feel like leadership found me rather than I found it. But I think what comes through is even though I didn't sort of have a fundamental understanding that this is a leadership position, it's just kind of... My intrinsic understanding of what leadership represents to me, which is about treating people fairly. It's about treating people equally, giving people the opportunity and sort of being passionate about a particular course and taking people on a vision with you. And even with Aquafit, when we founded that, the importance of leadership I think at that stage is that you have a team of people and you have such a big responsibility to these people, not just the providing a place for them to work so the business has to be successful, which is a big responsibility in itself, but also the opportunity to take these people on a journey and to share your vision, to influence and sort of have an impact on these people that they have a



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willingness to come with you on this journey, to share this vision of where you want to go. So I think, for me, the whole leadership piece is about acting with integrity and making sure that as a leader you're walking the walk and you're talking the talk and that you're... It's a case of people watching you and showing you vision but also emulating the role that you have and earning that respect because it's just really an ability to step in and step up to a situation when perhaps no one else would.

MURRAY: So what is it that allows you to do that?

KRISTEN: I think you just have to take things, do them and there's a certain amount like I said of self awareness and self belief to be able to kind of say, "Look I can do this." I have a strong passionate belief in this and I'm not afraid to speak up and I'm someone that can create a vision and share a vision and create that picture for people to move on that journey.

MURRAY: What I hear through that is having really strong values and beliefs.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: That you care enough. They prompt you then to action in different situations.

KRISTEN: Definitely.

MURRAY: Which is really important.

KRISTEN: Yeah.

MURRAY: I think you talk about being aware of that, creating your awareness and impact... It's making the conscious choices so we know what impact we're having for better or for worse.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: And sometimes we have to make those choices that aim for good in the short term.

KRISTEN: Exactly.



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MURRAY: But it's for the benefit overall. So fitness industry, pretty cutthroat as you alluded to the days of aerobics and spandex and brightly colored suits and things. It's changed. How has it changed? And you're one of the thought leaders in the industry in Australia. Where is it going to?

KRISTEN: Certainly when we started the Aquafit business back in 2004, so 14 years ago now... totally different landscape. We're a large single site facility which are similar models as far as the registered clubs. At that stage there were a few [Inaudible 14:37] centres, so the competition in terms of other businesses was quite sparse. Over the years we've seen the advent of changing business models. The biggest impact has probably been around the 24-hour fitness model which has created some opportunities, but it's also created some challenges. I mean our Aquafit model is a full service model, so we have fitness staff available all the time to help with programs. So we're very focused on the service aspect whereas the 24 model is largely skeleton staff and sort of focused on convenience. So there are over 400 of those locations in Australia now and it's still growing. If we look at what's happening in the North American market the trend is also around very low cost models, so high volume, low cost. So we're seeing businesses in the States... There's one particular one called Planet Fitness where you can join for something like \$6.00 a month and you can have all the treadmills or cardio equipment that you want, which is unheard of. But there are a lot of successful models around that based on the volume component. And the other thing which we're seeing is now the emergence of a lot of niche businesses. So we're seeing, particularly in America and somewhat here, is the emergence of what we're calling boutique and niche businesses. So these are around Pilates, yoga, cycling. So these are kind of small boutique businesses which have got a strong engagement and a strong feeling of community. So generally targeting... What we're seeing in the industry is that our millennial market is probably the low hanging fruit for a lot of operators because for these people it's a way of life. That's the way that they've grown up and this is something, this whole wellness piece and this lifestyle fitness is something that they want to invest in. They've kind of got the tribes that they go to. There is some strong sense of community. So there are some models which are doing that very successfully overseas. Some of them have made their way out here, but not quite yet. We haven't seen the emergence here. One of the biggest impacts we've had here is CrossFit. So the emergence of CrossFit and the success that we've seen with that worldwide has been phenomenal and it has impacted on a lot of the way that we program. It was established in the US and it's largely sort of kind of in a sense military style based, but...

MURRAY: Is it the old circuit type training?



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KRISTEN: It's more than that. What they do is that they have CrossFit... has these things called boxes. So you don't have a gym. You have a CrossFit box and within that you have various workouts that you follow. So for each day there's a workout of the day that you follow. The type of training is very high intensity. It's very rigorous. It has influenced the way that, like I said, we program and that we approach it. So traditionally, whilst we still have all the classes, this particular type of training has caused everybody to kind of rethink sort of what's happening. So that's been one of the big impactors. In terms of looking where we are moving forward, technology is the number one driver of how we're doing things. Like I said, this virtual reality, the augmented reality, the personal accountability through Fitbits and all this different types of technologies just allowing us to have that sort of taking it to the next level around our own personalization of the type of program and exercise that we want and also getting immediate feedback through things like the Fitbit. We've seen that happen. We've sort of even moved on since then. But technology even within fitness centres around virtual reality, running virtual classes and everything is kind of built on a technology platform of something. So technology will be driving the personalization of fitness further and further where members are now looking for an experience rather than just, "I go to the gym." People don't want to 'just go to the gym' anymore. They want an experience, really experiential economy.

MURRAY: It's a lifestyle.

KRISTEN: Yeah.

MURRAY: Lifestyle experience and I think I see it more and more. You go to a shopping centre.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: It's not about the shops.

KRISTEN: No.

MURRAY: It's a lifestyle experience.

KRISTEN: It's the experience. People want to engage and they want something so the challenge of business is to... How can we make use of that in a positive way? We've just got to motivate without kind of making ourselves redundant and having to do away. Because obviously now there are so many platforms and programs that they're virtual customer trainers. There are home based programs and there is also the



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combination of technology to actually using the home so that... For example there's Peloton. It's a brand in the US where they've got their own kind of cycle bike which you can buy at home and then you can actually dial in to a spin class and be a participant from anywhere in the world. So that combination of the home experience crossing over and almost blurring the lines. Whether you're exercising at home or at the gym or outside is being blurred in terms of what the possibilities are.

MURRAY: There's a whole piece and it's another discussion around the human need for socialization and connection.

KRISTEN: Absolutely. The challenge will be to integrate the socialization with the technology and combine it so that they're not mutually exclusive because there always will be a need to be engaged with other people and to be social in that respect.

MURRAY: So plenty ahead, plenty ahead.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.

MURRAY: Now, third and final question. What was your biggest failure and how does that inform your leadership today?

KRISTEN: When I look back at my career and some of the roles that I've been in, if there was one failure, it was a role that I set out to do really well and for reasons didn't sort of succeed. That reason was when I worked for a large fitness company who was a national fitness company. I am from the Wollongong area and I started this particular gym as a fitness manager, worked my way up through the ranks in over a three year period. Basically I went and worked in different roles as club general manager. The opportunity came back to the Wollongong club to be the club general manager. So I rejoiced at the fact that I was only going to be 10 minutes from home and I was really excited about that opportunity. But with every club there are sales, budgets and there are financials... and we're in a particularly challenging socioeconomic area. It was always known as the club that always had challenges. To meet budget we had considerations around that. So I was very enthusiastic about that role and approached it with enormous amounts of passion. I could see... obviously I knew a lot of the members in the club. I'd grown up in Wollongong for over 30 years so I had a pretty good understanding of... You know, having owned a gym, a lot of them were members at my gym years before. So I knew the club and I knew the challenges, but unfortunately sometimes with larger fitness brands there is almost like a one size fits all.



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MURRAY: Yeah.

KRISTEN: So what I tried to do is to provide some insights and solutions to some of the challenges that we were experiencing which largely fell on deaf ears. So a lot of my marketing initiatives and my suggestions around how we could overcome this were largely kind of... Because it didn't fit into the cookie cutter pattern, just basically it was a case of, "No. Thank you very much. You've got to hit budget." So quite a ruthless organization at that stage so after a couple of months of coming close to budget, just about doing everything and not sort of embracing my enthusiastic ideas, I was pretty much sort of told that I needed to move myself out of the organization.

MURRAY: Right. Right.

KRISTEN: In one sense, I suppose, I failed in that role. But the failure was really disguised as an opportunity for me because what happened at the back of that is that some three months later I was offered the opportunity to build the Aquafit business and start up here in Campbelltown. So even though technically I wasn't successful in that role, what I did realize is that there were a number of learnings for me and my learnings around that were it is best you don't burn your bridges. The fitness community is very very small. I am now working on the board with some people that worked for that organization, so I think it's important not to burn your bridges.

MURRAY: I think that's a really good lesson. I made the mistake of burning bridges before and yeah, it's just silly.

KRISTEN: Yeah.

MURRAY: Youth, emotion has no part in that. Yes?

KRISTEN: Yeah. Absolutely. And I think also being not afraid to speak up. So getting back to that integrity piece that I'm big on. It's really being true to yourself and being not afraid to speak up for what you believe in. So even though my thoughts and my suggestions weren't necessarily embraced in the way that I had hoped, I want afraid to speak my mind and in a positive way just sort of stand up for what I believe in. And like I said, I guess it's that whole saying that even though I faced those challenges, those challenges served me very well as a springboard to another opportunity which was just around the corner had I known at that particular time. I think, for me, it was around not compromising my values, so staying firm to what I believed in. That's when you're going to thrive in a role when you have that alignment of your core values with the organization's values and have that great culture fit as well.



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MURRAY: So we ought to finish up now. Thank you for sharing and all the insights you've given us. A little sign off. You're an expert in fitness. Now a lot of us have got these gym memberships and often they sit there and languish and once a year after end of the year, New Year resolution, it picks up again and drops off. Do you have any tips for people listening how to go about avoiding that up and down and really build a consistency and get the most out of their gym membership.

KRISTEN: I think it's being first of all realistic in your expectations and knowing that over a 12-month period you're not going to be Heathrow times every week as much as that might be the ideal. And I think when we're approaching people as new memberships and we ask them what their goals are, I think to be realistic and provide some support when they say "How many times do you think you'd like to exercise?" And it's like, "I'm going to be Heathrow times." And it's kind of like, "Well look if you could get here once a week all 12 months, that would be great."

MURRAY: Yeah.

KRISTEN: So that's the first thing. And I think it's about establishing patterns and habits and to do that I think the piece is to find something that you really enjoy. Gym memberships aren't for everybody and these days we're well aware there are so many different options for people... indoors, outdoors, so many different forms of exercise. The most important thing is to do something that you enjoy and to keep moving. Try a different class. There will be something that you enjoy. There will be classes that you hate as well. And then if you have the opportunity to find someone to exercise with. So either to bring someone along with you or if you get the opportunity particularly through classes to meet someone that you connected with and then you've got an accountability buddy. So you have the chance to sort of come along with someone and say, "Yeah. We've got a regular meeting at the gym at that particular time." If you've got that accountability and you can do that then you've got someone that you can sort of work through that and share your experiences along the way and coffee is always good.

MURRAY: Coffee gives zap to it. I really like that piece about setting realistic goals. I think gym at lifework. We give ourselves a hard time.

KRISTEN: Absolutely.



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MURRAY: Just lower the bar a bit and enjoy when you exceed it.

KRISTEN: Yeah. That's right.

MURRAY: Rather than beating yourself up.

KRISTEN: Yeah, because that motivation is never going to be 100% on all the time. So it's recognizing the times that you make the most. When you feel energetic and you can take the best approach, but also like you said, not beating yourself up when there are times that you just can't get there or your life gets in the way.

MURRAY: Peer support. Thank you very much. Great pleasure to have you. People listening to this might want to reach out, connect with you. How would people do that? What's the best way?

KRISTEN: I'm happy to give you my contact details if people would like to have a chat with me. I'm on LinkedIn. It's probably a great opportunity to connect with people. They can email me. I'm happy to... Email me if there are any questions that they have.

MURRAY: And your email address is?

KRISTEN: Is on kgreen@aquafit.com.au

MURRAY: Beautiful. Thank you very much.

KRISTEN: It's been my pleasure. Thank you, Murray.

MURRAY: Thank you, Kristen.

Thanks to Kristen for sharing her leadership moments and giving us some great insights into the world of the fitness industry. Remember for the next week try writing down those three different things you're grateful for daily and let some special people know how much you appreciate them. We'd love to hear what happens for you. Drop me a note at murray@murraywright.com.



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